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Arabic Literature and the Nobel Prize

By ROGER ALLEN For many centuries the Arabs have constituted for the Western world an alien and often confrontational entity, a quintessential "other." The posture can be traced back at least to the Crusades, and as we know to our cost from current conflicts in Ireland, Lebanon, and the Gulf, wars based on religious belief are particularly capable of engendering misinformation and misunderstandings of prolonged duration. In spite of recent developments in what is known both about the Arab world and also about the processes by which that knowledge is interpreted, many Western attitudes of considerable antiquity still persist. The "Middle East" was so designated by the Western imperialist interests of previous generations (to which the Middle East was "middle"), and the inhabitants of the region seem to have been condemned by their very proximity to Europe, and therefrom by the frequency of military confrontations with the European political powers throughout the ages, to be the subject of a wide variety of religious and cultural polemics. By contrast, the nations of what was simultaneously designated as the "Far East" were a more remote and "exotic" entity, something which, within a less directly confrontational context, seems to have promoted among Western scholars (perhaps automatically) a closer attention to the literary production of the region. More recently, events such as the series of conflicts following the foundation of the State of Israel and the emergence of a newly invigorated fundamentalist Islam have given the Western nations their share of anxiety and often annoyance. However, rather than being seen as offering opportunities for a renewed interest in the history and nature of Arabo-Islamic culture, these contemporary confrontations and conflicts have tended to cement still further attitudes which lead to a widespread unfamiliarity with this elaborate complex of nations and peoples and a concomitant reluctance to change the situation.

The reception of Arabic literature in the West has thus always been set within a complicated array of cultural attitudes. The intricate questions of "influence" and cultural exchange between the two remain the subject of much controversy. While research on the implications of the presence of Arabic lyric poetry and picaresque narrative in ninth-century al-Andalus (as Spain was termed) continues to tantalize some scholars and antagonize others, the influence of Sir William Jones's translations of Eastern poetry and of Galland's translation of *The Thousand and One Nights* on the history of European literature is scarcely open to debate. More recently, and particularly following the colonization of many countries in the Arab world by Europe in the nineteenth century, the

process has been predominantly unidirectional. The genres of the novel and drama were to a large degree transplanted into modern Arabic literature direct from the Western tradition, rapidly superseding any attempts at reviving older genres. It was in the realm of poetry, the most vigorous of the classical genres, that the neoclassical tendency persisted longest, but it too came under the influence of Western "schools" of poetry. As one of the participants in the process, Jabra Ibrahim Jabra, a Palestinian poet, points out: "Influences reaching the Arabs had a way of being thirty or forty years late. Up to 1950 most of these influences belonged to pre-World War I, if not to the end of the 19th century."¹ Jabra continues by noting that European influences were not only late, but also compressed and occasionally out of sequence vis-à-vis their European chronology.

It is within the context of this confusing set of influences and attitudes that modern Arabic literature and the West confront each other. That there should be misunderstanding and "anxiety" on both sides is hardly surprising. It would also seem unreasonable to expect that any exercise in transcultural evaluation such as that essayed by the Nobel Prize Committee should not be a reflection of the general situation. With that in mind, I will address some of the issues raised within the framework of the prize and its selection committee under three headings: access to Arabic literature in the West; the Nobel Prize criteria; and finally, a short segment concerning those Arab authors whose candidacy seems plausible within the current terms of reference.

Many Western readers are exposed to a monument of Arabic literature at a relatively early age in the form of *The Thousand and One Nights*, a work which has for a long time provided a rich source of entertainment for children. I myself can vividly remember being taken to see pantomime versions of both "Aladdin" and "Ali Baba" as a child. Ironically, this huge collection of tales was never regarded as literature by the Arabs themselves, and current scholarly interest is largely the result of Western attention, initially to the sources and, more recently, to narrative structure and techniques. The popularity and exoticism of these tales within Western culture seems to have produced two major results. In the first place, it fostered a fantastic view of Middle Eastern culture, something which has been documented by a large number of sources² and which finds what is perhaps its extreme representation in such media as the cinema (from the Sindbad films of Douglas Fairbanks Sr. to more recent examples such as *The Jewel of the Nile*). Second, the almost automatic selection of tales from this collection for anthologies of "world literature" succeeded to a large degree in

blocking any further interest in searching for other examples of literature written in Arabic. The wealth of classical Arabic poetry remained essentially a closed book except to a few scholars, and even they were not of any great assistance: the German scholar-poet Nöldeke gave his opinion (in the introduction to a collection of Arabic poetry) that the esthetic pleasure gained from a reading of the poems hardly justified the pain involved.³ Thus, the general Western readership, endeavoring to evaluate examples of literature produced in today's Arab world, may perhaps be considered to be at a double disadvantage: not only are they presented with works which seem to show a strong reliance on Western models with which they are already familiar; but also the history of the Arabic literary tradition, available to them through their own general education and the more direct avenue of translation of the "classics," is incomplete and distorted. There is thus an unsettling lack of context.

If we turn now to a consideration of the criteria under which the Swedish Academy's Nobel Committee operates, some of the issues which need to be raised in connection with the above survey become clear.⁴ One of the members of the jury itself, the Swedish physician-novelist Lars Gyllensten, readily acknowledges a point which has already been made: "Literary works are more or less bound to the literary environment in which they are created, and the farther away from it one is, the harder it is to do them justice." I might observe that, on the basis of my comments above, the epithet *far* in this instance needs to be interpreted within the context of cultural attitudes rather than pure geographic distance. The same writer then goes on to make what is, for the purposes of Arabic literature, a statement of major importance.

The task of awarding the Nobel Prize in Literature involves the obligation of trying to find methods for keeping oneself *au fait* with what is happening in literature all over the world and for appraising it, either on one's own or with the aid of specialists. Finally, the prize awardees must try to familiarize themselves with the works of most value, directly or via translations, and to make a careful assessment of their quality with all the viewpoints conceivably necessary for a reasonable evaluation.⁵

Two issues emerge here: first, the question of evaluation; and second, that of translation. On the matter of translation, one has to state fairly bluntly that, as far as English is concerned, modern Arab *littérateurs* have not been particularly well served by translation (although the situation seems at least marginally better in French). A number of things are implied within this statement: that there are relatively few qualified people in the West interested in translating works of modern Arabic literature (and most of them are academic scholars with other responsibilities); that the works selected for translation show some peculiar preferences and omissions (the emphasis on the Egyptian novel at the expense of other national traditions, for instance); that the translations are sometimes not of a

high standard; and above all, that the publishing outlets for such efforts are exiguous in the extreme. Although small and adventurous presses such as Sindbad (France) and Three Continents (USA) produce as many translated editions as their limited budgets will permit, the record of larger publishing companies with regard to the publication of works of Arabic literature can only be described as deplorable. We can once again refer to the above comments about attitudes, although the formulation "lack of market" apparently becomes a more satisfactory substitute phrase within the demands of modern economics and thus becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy, as in the recent decision to discontinue the Arab Authors series at Heinemann (England) following the firm's takeover by a large industrial concern. Thus is a major world literature apparently declared "unmarketable."⁶

The second issue raised by Gyllensten's statement involves evaluation, and most particularly the phrase "with the aid of specialists." If we assume the phrase "Arabic literature" to incorporate literary works written in the Arabic language throughout the Arabic-speaking world, then we have to acknowledge that the Nobel Committee is presented with an enormous and probably impossible task; for few indeed are the critics and scholars, whether Arab or non-Arab, whose knowledge of the field is sufficiently broad to encompass the entire region and the variety of genres involved and to present the committee with a list of nominees which will transcend political, religious, and cultural boundaries. Here we must refer to the documentation regarding the nomination procedure itself.

The right to nominate candidates for the Prize in Literature is granted to members of the Swedish Academy; and of the French Academies which are similar to it in character and objectives; to members of the humanistic sections of other academies, as well as to members of the humanistic institutions and societies as enjoy the same rank as academies and to university professors of aesthetics, literature and history.⁷

In view of the extremely small number of "specialists" in Arabic literature to whom the members of the Nobel Committee might have access and indeed of the relatively few contacts between Western scholars in the field and Arab *littérateurs* and literary critics, it is hardly surprising that this nominating procedure has not worked in favor of nominations from the field of Arabic literature.

Another feature of the criteria for nominations which has been much debated concerns the stipulation in Alfred Nobel's will that the prize honor someone whose writings have been "of an ideal tendency," a phrase which is interpreted by Gyllensten to mean "a striving for the good of mankind, for humaneness, common sense, progress and happiness . . . literary achievements with constructive aims."⁸ While this rubric has been liberally interpreted, several critics have suggested dropping it altogether.⁹ Those who have any familiarity with the history of the Arab world

during the course of this century, and most particularly in the decades since World War II, will perhaps realize that "common sense, progress and happiness" have not been attributes which have provided the driving force for the majority of Arab authors. Alienation, rebellion, confrontation, rejection, revolution, self-sacrifice, struggle—these have been far more characteristic of the literature of the last several decades.

All this said, it will perhaps not be a surprise if I eschew the opportunity to compare recent prizewinners with potential nominees from the Arab world. No Arab has as yet won the prize; whether one will (or can) under the current criteria seems open to doubt. That is not to say, of course, that there are not Arab *littérateurs* who are worthy of nomination. I would like to devote just a few lines to a consideration of my own short list: Najib Mahfuz (sometimes written as Naguib Mahfouz) of Egypt and Adunis (or Adonis) of Lebanon. Both manage to combine two considerations: in the first place, they are preeminently great writers; second, translations of many of their works are available in at least English and French. However, this availability in English translation itself presents us with a problem. In the case of Mahfuz, the novels which are now available in translation are, in the main, part of a series being published by the American University in Cairo Press. Because of the order in which the translations were completed, the novels have appeared in essentially random sequence; most especially, Mahfuz's major monument and contribution to modern literature as a whole, *Al-Thulathiyya* (The Trilogy; 1956–57), has yet to appear. The slightly earlier *Al-Bidaya wa-al-Nihaya* (1951; Eng. *The Beginning and the End*) is now available, along with *Zuqaq al-Midaqq* (1947; Eng. *Midaq Alley*), but the bulk of the published translations are from novels which were written in the 1960s; though all are of extreme interest within the perspective of the recent history of Egyptian society, they are of varying literary quality in both the original and in translation.¹⁰

Adunis has been particularly poorly served in translation, although some critics would suggest that the very nature of his own poetic language and vision encourages translators to indulge in some extreme pieces of creativity of their own. Whatever the role of cause and effect here, the fact remains that there are very few translations of Adunis's poetry into any Western language which manage to convey to the reader the complex and multilayered significances of the original poetry. That said, it must be affirmed that, more than any other modern Arab poet, Adunis has succeeded in radically reforming attitudes toward the great tradition of Arabic poetry, and using that and his own immense

creativity as a base, he has established new terms of reference for poetry and the poetic and has applied his vision in poems of striking originality and beauty.¹¹

It is, however, with Mahfuz that I choose to conclude. Although Herbert Howarth may have complained about the emphasis on novelists in awarding the Nobel Prize,¹² it was in the new and largely imported field of fiction that enormous efforts had to be made by Arab *littérateurs* during the early decades of this century. Najib Mahfuz is acknowledged throughout the entire Arab world as the great pioneer in the mature Arabic novel, and he has achieved that distinction by dint of sheer hard work, tenacity, patience in adversity (both political and medical), and a disarming humility. He is recognized as the Arab world's leading writer of fiction because he has not only produced a whole stream of excellent novels over a period of four decades, but also turned the novel, as a means of societal comment and criticism, into an accessible and accomplished medium. His is a nomination which, the normalities of Arab politics aside, would be welcomed throughout the Arab world.

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¹ Jabra Ibrahim Jabra, "Modern Arabic Literature and the West," *Journal of Arabic Literature*, 2 (1971), p. 81.

² Such as Muhsin Jassim Ali's *Scheherezade in England*, Washington, D.C., Three Continents, 1981.

³ For an interesting experiment in the reading of translations of classical Arabic poetry, see "And heard great argument': An Essay in the Practical Criticism of Arabic Poetry," *Journal of Arabic Literature*, 1 (1970), pp. 49–69.

⁴ I shall be referring to the article by William Riggan, "The Swedish Academy and the Nobel Prize in Literature: History and Procedure," *WLT* 55:3 (Summer 1981), pp. 399–405.

⁵ Cited in Riggan, p. 404.

⁶ The recent foundation of the Project for the Translation of Arabic (PROTA), directed by the famous Palestinian poet and critic Salma Khadra' al-Jayyusi, has shown through its publications (three novels and two major anthologies as of 1987) that excellent and accessible translations of works of modern Arabic literature can be produced and published with the necessary cooperation between translators and editors. The volume *Modern Arabic Poetry: An Anthology* (New York, Columbia University Press, 1987) is exemplary in this regard.

⁷ See Riggan, p. 401.

⁸ See Riggan, p. 403.

⁹ Herbert Howarth, "Nobel Prize Symposium: A Petition to the Swedish Academy," *BA* 41:1 (Winter 1967), p. 6.

¹⁰ On Mahfuz, see both Roger Allen, "Aspects of Technique in the Modern Arabic Short Story," and Muhammad Siddiq, "The Contemporary Arabic Novel in Perspective," in *WLT*'s special issue on the literatures of the Middle East, 60:2 (Spring 1986), pp. 199–206 and 206–11 respectively.

¹¹ On Adunis, see Samuel Hazo and Mirene Ghossein, "Adonis: A Poet in Lebanon," *BA* 46:2 (Spring 1972), pp. 238–42.

¹² See Howarth, p. 6.